

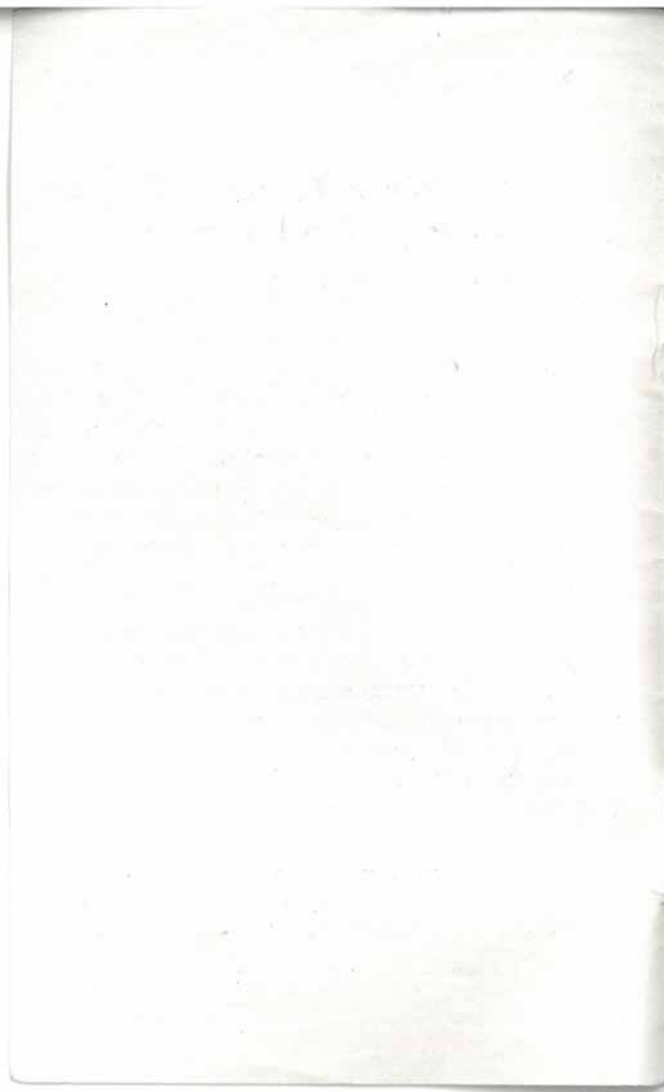
What Is the GENERAL CONFERENCE?

By

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What Is the General Conference?

THE General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America "owes its origin and its growth to a deeply felt need of a closer union of the individual congregation, with the object of promoting the 'unity of the spirit in the bond of peace,' of establishing more firmly the common faith, and of rendering mutual assistance in good works." (Art. 3 General Conference Constitution)

The purpose of this pamphlet is briefly to set forth the aims and scope of General Conference activities. It is sent forth with the prayer of our Lord, "that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them and I in them." (John 17:26)

1. The Common Faith.—The General Conference feels a sense of unity with evangelical Christians everywhere. Ac-

cepting the full Bible and the Apostles' Creed, the General Conference has common convictions with Christians of other denominations who also have "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." (For a fuller doctrinal statement see pp. 11; also Arts. 10-12, in Conference Constitution.)

2. Unity in Essentials.—With all Mennonites the General Conference shares the common convictions of believers' baptism, voluntary church membership, freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, nonresistance, non-swearing of oaths, the simple life, non-conformity (See points 16-18), brotherly love, mutual aid, and a strong, family life.

The General Conference believes that all Mennonite branches can learn from one another; that Mennonite unity on essentials should be encouraged; that true Christian charity should prevail in regard to differences sincerely held, and that all churches stand under a common judgment in the light of Jesus Christ and the written Word of God. I Corin-

thians 12 provides the perfect scriptural basis for unity without uniformity.

3. The Exact Name of the Conference is "The General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America." (The "Old" Mennonite General Conference is distinct from "General Conference" Mennonites.)

4. Seven Districts.—Over 240 congregations are organized into seven districts: Canadian, Central, Eastern, Middle, Northern, Pacific, and Western. Membership of a church in a district conference does not automatically make it a member of General Conference, although most of the above congregations have already affiliated with the larger group.

5. The Membership in General Conference is approximately 42,000, or a total of about 60,000, including children. This is the second-largest Mennonite group in the United States and the largest in Canada.

6. **Beginnings.**—The Eastern is the oldest of the seven districts. It was organized one hundred years ago (1847) by J. H. Oberholzer, then a young preacher of the Franconia Pennsylvania Conference. The principal reasons for the formation of the Conference were: missions, education, dress regulations, the need for a conference constitution, rules of procedure, Sunday schools, and minutes for conference meetings. J. H. Oberholzer founded the first Mennonite religious magazine in America in 1852. In 1853 he organized the first Mennonite Sunday school in America. Most of Oberholzer's original objectives have been adopted by American Mennonite groups. Since this original movement, Mennonites with diverse origins in Europe and America have been added to Conference membership.

7. **The Primary Interests** that led to the organization of the General Conference in 1861 were missions and education. The distinguished Mennonite historian, C. Henry Smith, declares that at the start "the General Conference was

not a separate denomination, but was a unification movement aiming at the union of all Mennonites in America." As such it had its source in three centers: in Pennsylvania, Ontario, and Iowa.

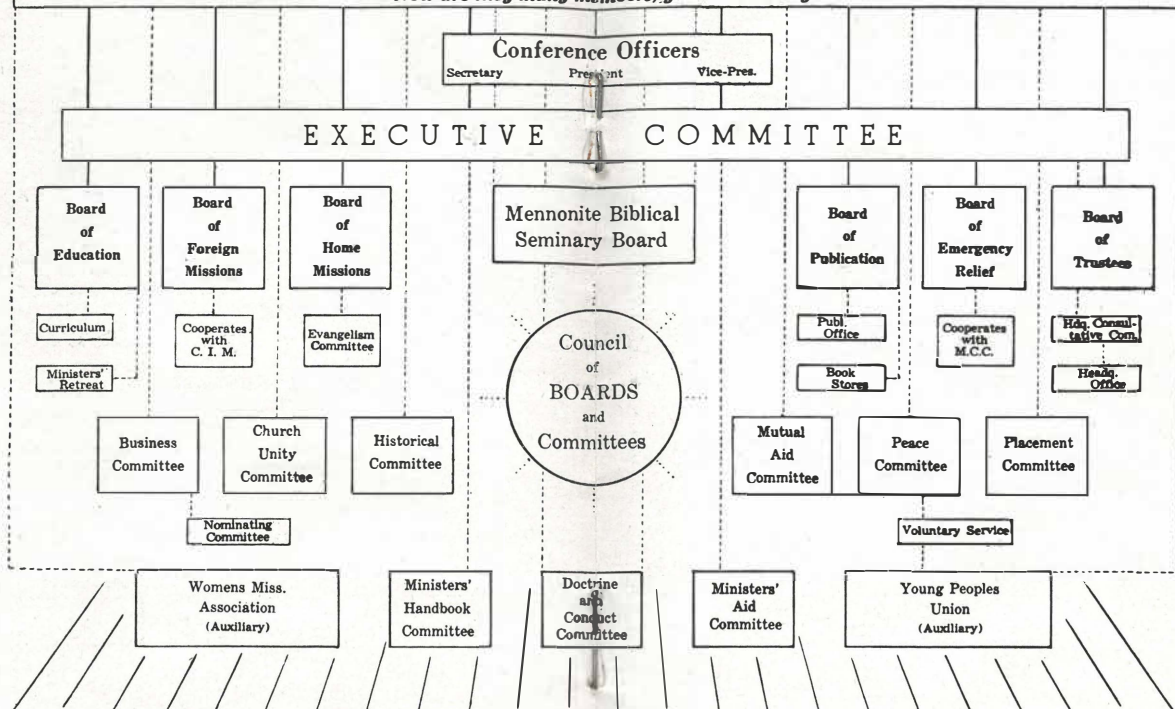
8. The Great Commission is the basic task of a witnessing church. The first American Mennonite mission was established by the General Conference in 1880. The place was the Oklahoma Indian territory and the missionary was S. S. Haury, Summerfield, Illinois. The Conference now has missions throughout the United States and Canada, India, China, South America, and Africa.

9. Mennonite Central Committee.—The General Conference is affiliated with the Mennonite Central Committee in Civilian Public Service, War Sufferers' Relief, mutual aid, and colonization. The Conference rejoices in the Christian brotherhood it has found with Mennonites of every branch. Many Mennonite Central Committee workers are General Conference members.

The General Conference of the Mennonite Church of N. A.

over 200 congregations, about 42,000 members, in 7 districts

"Now are they many members, yet but one body."



The Field Is the World

"Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature"

" teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway"

10. **Official Conference Headquarters** are at 722 Main Street, Newton, Kansas. The official Conference publication is **The Mennonite**, published weekly, Reynold Weinbrenner, Editor.

11. **Conference Schools.**—Serving the General Conference constituency in a unique sense is the Mennonite Biblical Seminary and the Mennonite Bible School, 4614 Woodlawn Avenue, Chicago 15, Illinois. Other schools are Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas; Bluffton College, Bluffton, Ohio; Freeman College, Freeman, South Dakota; Mennonite Collegiate Institute, Gretna, Manitoba, Canada; Rosthern Academy, Rosthern, Saskatchewan, Canada, and other smaller local Bible schools.

12. **Hospitals and Homes for the Aged** are maintained in the various parts of the Conference by district or local groups. Nurses' training is offered at Bethel Hospital, Newton, Kansas; Mennonite Hospital, Bloomington, Ill. A renewed interest is being shown in the support of mental rest homes.

13. **Retreats.**—The Eastern District was the first to develop its own retreat grounds. Each of the other districts has sponsored growing programs of youth retreats. During the summer of 1946 General Conference ministers and missionaries and their wives held their first annual retreat.

14. Both **General and District Conference Sessions** are controlled by ministerial and lay delegates. All decisions of officers, boards, or committees are subject to approval by the delegates from local churches. This approval is expressed by ballot vote which is apportioned according to membership. The title of "Bishop" is seldom used. Most congregations have their own elder or elders. Hence, it is proper to call the General Conference churches "congregational" in their government and polity.

15. **The Organizational Chart**, pp. 8-9 (center spread) shows the main areas in which the General Conference is active. Vertical lines emphasize that

all boards and standing committees are directly responsible to the constituency. The Conference officers and the chairmen of the six originally created boards constitute an executive committee which represents the Conference between sessions and co-ordinates the work of boards and committees. The Seminary Board has a unique relation to Conference. A Council of Boards and Committees meets annually for the clearing of common problems. Those interested in a more detailed study of the duties of the various boards, standing committees, temporary committees, affiliations, auxiliaries, etc., may direct their inquiries to the Conference Headquarters, 722 Main St., Newton, Kansas. Free copies of the *Charter and Constitution* will be sent on request.

16. Christians Seeking a Minimum of Church Regulations will feel at home in the General Conference. As such, it enforces no dress restrictions. Its congregations generally practice open communion and grant pulpit fellowship to other evangelical Christians.

With this greater freedom are real problems, since every emphasis has its own peculiar risks and dangers. Christian liberty cannot dispense with church discipline. General Conference churches seek to avoid extremes of both kinds: the one which allows no liberty, and the other which completely ignores specific regulations. This is the same issue with which Paul struggled in Galatia and Corinth.

17. No Legal Uniformity Enforced.—There is a freedom for variation of emphasis by each local congregation within the Christian faith as understood by the Mennonite Church. The Conference is advisory, not legislative. Yet it seeks to express the common convictions of the church.

18. Communion is generally observed two to four times a year. Foot-washing is optional, though a large majority of churches do not practice it. There is no specific regulation regarding the devotional covering. While simplicity in worship is urged, there are no re-

strictions concerning musical instruments.

19. Young People's Work.—A deeply spiritual and vigorous program for young people is urged upon all congregations. The General Conference believes that Mennonite youth can be reached by a healthy, vital program which ministers to all sides of human personality under the Lordship of Christ.

20. For Larger Historical Treatments of the General Conference the reader is referred to *The Story of the Mennonites*, by C. Henry Smith, and *History of the Mennonite General Conference* (Vols. I-II), by H. P. Krehbiel.

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The General Conference has never adopted an official creed, believing that no man-made formulation should supplant the Holy Scriptures. But, it has unofficially accepted the Apostles' Creed, the Ris Confession made in Holland two hundred years ago, and, more recently, a statement adopted at the Souderton,

Pennsylvania, General Conference of 1941. This statement is as follows:

“Accepting the full Bible and the Apostolic Creed:

“a. We believe in one God, eternally existing and manifest as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“b. We believe in the Deity of Jesus Christ, the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth, born of the Virgin Mary, in His perfect humanity, His atoning death, and His personal triumphant return.

“c. We believe in the immortality of the soul, the resurrection of the dead, and a future state determined by divine judgment.

“d. We believe in the divine inspiration and the infallibility of the Bible as the Word of God and the only trustworthy guide of faith and life.

“e. We believe a Christian is one saved by grace whose life is transformed into the likeness of Christ by His atoning death and the power of His resurrection.

"f. We believe that Christ lived and taught the way of life as recorded in the Scriptures, which is God's plan for individuals and the race, and that it becomes disciples of Christ to live in this way, thus manifesting in their personal and social life and relationships, the love and holiness of God. And we believe that this way of life also implies nonresistance to evil by carnal means, the fullest exercise of love, and the resolute abandonment of the use of violence, including warfare. We believe further that the Christian life will of necessity express itself in nonconformity to the world in life and conduct.

"g. We believe in prayer as fellowship with God, a desire to be in His will, and in its divine power.

"h. We believe that the Christian Church consists of believers who have repented from their sins, have accepted Christ by faith and are born again, and sincerely endeavor by the grace of God to live the Christian life.

"i. We believe in the brotherhood of the redeemed under the fatherhood of God in Christ."